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# **Passive Revolution Revisited: From the *Prison Notebooks* to Our 'Great and Terrible World'**

## *Abstract*

Building on the recent fertile season of studies on passive revolution, this article argues for the (re-)increasing relevance of the concept in these times of capitalist crisis. However, it is also argued that this renewed relevance should be predicated on a narrower definition of passive revolution than the one generally used in recent debates in critical International Political Economy. Returning to the *Prison Notebooks*, four elements are identified here as the conceptual core of passive revolution, to which Gramsci's admittedly varying uses of the phrase are implicitly anchored: an international precondition determining the necessity of restructuring on the national scale; a domestic precondition determining the specific form of this restructuring; a specific method through which passive revolution is effected; and a specific outcome which entails achieving the passivity of subaltern classes through the partial fulfilment and simultaneous displacement of their demands. Thus redefined, passive revolution becomes a valuable instrument for grasping the challenges facing the emergence of a subaltern bloc in the current organic crisis of capitalism.

## **Introduction**

Ever since the publication of part of his *Prison Notebooks* in English and the full critical edition in Italian in the 1970s, Antonio Gramsci has become an essential reference point for critical scholars interested in bridging the analysis of economic structure and political and ideological superstructures. This common interest has led to the proliferation of a range of different and at times contrasting interpretations. Whereas it is understandable that more than two-thousand pages scattered with notes lend themselves to interpretive divergences, and whereas such diversity is in principle to be welcomed, the main risk here is for anyone to build their own *prêt-à-porter* version of Gramsci. And if Gramsci's work deserves any attention, 'it is because his philosophical assumptions do preclude some interpretations of his thought *in general*, and support others' (Morera, 1990: 1). It is only wise to assume that in twenty-nine notebooks written across seven years in prison one's thought necessarily develops, sometimes falling into contradictions, some others venturing tentatively into uncharted paths that may be followed through, re-elaborated or abandoned altogether in subsequent notes. For this reason it is all the more important to return to the original sources before discussing diverging interpretations. More emphasis should also be placed on the social context within which Gramsci's own thinking was embedded, following J.M Clark's maxim: 'To understand any forceful writer and make the necessary allowances, find out

what it was against which he was reacting'.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, it is imperative not to fall into the symmetric trap of reducing Gramsci's thoughts and insights to the context in which they originated. Gramsci was acutely aware of this risk and devoted a series of notes to the relation between past and present (1971a: 465, Q11§27; 1975: 419-21, Q4§1; 1726-8, Q14§67).<sup>2</sup> Here, he suggests that it is necessary to sift through historical processes, as well as intellectual production, in order to keep what is organic and thus has the potential of being reactualised, while making 'the necessary allowances' for what is conjunctural.

The importance of investigating concepts starting from their original context to see how they might transcend it applies especially to the study of passive revolution. This is arguably one of the most 'political' concepts in Gramsci's thought, and thus more than others dependent on the strategic and theoretical *problématique* he was facing, namely: if the proletariat had emerged in many European countries as a collective social and political actor in the wake of industrialisation, why had the deepest crisis of capitalism not led to a revolution, but rather to various forms of capitalist reorganisation? This was the question of most practical relevance to Gramsci, and should be taken as an orientation device to examine how passive revolution is used in the *Prison Notebooks*. Incidentally, this is also a question of great contemporary relevance, in the midst of the 'global organic crisis' unleashed by the financial crisis of 2007-8 (Gill, 2010).

This article thus starts by looking at the three different usages of passive revolution in the *Prison Notebooks*, and at the conceptual extensions – as well as tensions – that they imply. It begins from the bulk of notes on Italian state formation during Risorgimento and cognate processes occurring at the same time in other European countries. Here passive revolution is used to identify both the *transition towards* capitalism and the related process of state formation. It then moves on to the notes discussing whether fascism might also be seen as a passive revolution, this time entailing a *hybrid transition*, characterised by the intensification of capitalism in the North and its extension and consolidation in the South of Italy. Passive revolution is also mentioned in the notebook on Americanism and Fordism, and here it clearly identifies a *transition within* the capitalist mode of production. While these extensions create some degree of conceptual instability, the second section suggests that it is still possible to identify a conceptual core defining Gramsci's use of passive revolution, revolving around four elements. The first two outline the preconditions of passive revolutions: one international, related to the necessity of restructuring brought about by the uneven development of capitalism; and one internal, pointing towards the specific relation of political forces, characterised by the weakness of both subaltern and dominant classes. In

light of its relative weakness, the dominant class heavily relies on its control of state power to effect a passive revolution, whose third distinctive element is thus the method through which restructuring occurs. Finally, a passive revolution is also distinctive in that its outcome must be a structural transformation that simultaneously consolidates the political rule of the dominant class by weakening and breaking up the emerging subaltern bloc through the partial fulfilment and displacement of its demands.

The third and fourth sections of the article put this conceptual core in dialogue with the work by Adam Morton and Alex Callinicos on passive revolution and its contemporary relevance in International Political Economy (IPE), and provides the platform for advancing a twin argument on the relevance of passive revolution in the current juncture of our 'great and terrible world', as Gramsci put it in a letter to his wife (1964: 47). On the one hand, and partly *contra* Morton, this article suggests that passive revolution should be given a narrower definition. On the other hand, and partly *contra* Callinicos, in light of the increasing importance that Gramsci accords to the international as a necessary precondition for passive revolution, this article suggests that, in times of 'intensified uneven development' (Kiely, 2007: 434), passive revolution might arguably be as relevant as ever. As popular revolts appear to foreshadow the return of revolution as 'the sixth great power' in global politics (Halliday, 1999), it is a strategic imperative to investigate the weaknesses often making these revolts a manifestation of 'sporadic and incoherent rebelliousness' (Gramsci, 2007: 252, Q8§25), as well as the instruments deployed by ruling classes, increasingly lacking in hegemonic clout, to defuse and displace the threat of an emerging subaltern bloc. With its attention to how, in Callinicos' own definition, 'revolution-inducing strains are at once displaced and at least partly fulfilled' (2010: 498), passive revolution might still provide a very useful analytical tool to this end.

### **Passive revolution in the *Prison Notebooks*: extensions and tensions**

Passive revolution appears several times in the *Prison Notebooks*, but less frequently than 'philosophy of praxis', hegemony, the structure-superstructures image, and other concepts usually associated with Gramsci. As documented by Voza (2004), passive revolution emerges in different phases of his imprisonment, with reference to different historical junctures, and with a slightly but constantly expanding meaning. What remains at the heart of Gramsci's use of passive revolution is its function in helping us understand 'the global problematic of transition' (Buci-Glucksmann, 1979: 207), particularly in relation to two of the main arguments advanced by Marx in his *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political*

*Economy*, of which 'the theory of passive revolution is a necessary critical corollary' (Gramsci, 1971a: 114, Q15§62; 106, Q15§17).

The concept of 'passive revolution' must be rigorously derived from two fundamental principles of political science: 1. that no social formation disappears as long as the productive forces which have developed within it still find room for further forward movement; 2. that a society does not set for itself tasks for whose solution the necessary conditions have not already been incubated, etc.

*Risorgimento*. In the vast majority of references, passive revolution is invoked to understand the twin transition of Italian Risorgimento, which under the leadership of the Kingdom of Piedmont entailed both a process of state formation and the unfolding of the capitalist mode of production. Gramsci borrows the phrase 'passive revolution' from the Neapolitan intellectual Vincenzo Cuoco, who used it to analyse the failure of the Parthenopean revolution of 1799 *vis-à-vis* the success of the French revolution. The latter, understood by Gramsci as the archetypal transition into modernity, characterised by a 'revolutionary explosion' (Gramsci, 1971a: 114, Q10II§61), is also the example Italian Risorgimento is pitted against. According to Gramsci, from its original formulation passive revolution had quickly been transformed into 'a positive concept, a political programme', hiding 'the determination to abdicate and capitulate at the first serious threat of an Italian revolution that would be profoundly popular, i.e.: radically national' (Gramsci, 1971a: 59f, Q10I§6). It is within this context that one can place Gramsci's understanding 'of the "passive revolution" not as a programme, as it was for Italian liberals of the Risorgimento, but as a criterion of interpretation, in the absence of other active elements to a dominant extent' (Gramsci, 1971a: 114: Q15§62).

This final reference to an active element, in turn, can only be understood if placed within the context of Gramsci's dialectical approach, and particularly to his Hegelian understanding of history as a process of thesis, antithesis and synthesis (Bobbio, 1958). Here the element that is lacking 'to a dominant extent' is the antithesis, unable to 'present intransigently all its potentialities for development' (Gramsci, 1971a: 114, Q15§62). This is particularly evident in Gramsci's remarks on Cavour's awareness of his historical role in driving the process of state-building in Italy on a conservative-moderate platform *vis-à-vis* the inability of the Action Party, and particularly of his leader Mazzini, to develop a similar understanding of their role (Gramsci, 1971a: 108, Q15§11).

The passive revolution of Risorgimento was also characterised by the limitations of the thesis, that is: by the lack of a hegemonic class, again in counterpoint to the French experience. On the one hand, as the scattered pieces of the ruling class existing in Italy at the time 'had the function of "domination" without that of "leadership": dictatorship without hegemony' (Gramsci, 1971a: 106, Q15§59), transition had to be led by the Piedmont state, acting as a surrogate in the absence of a leading class. On the other hand, exactly because of the limitations of the Italian bourgeoisie and the lack of a strong Jacobin party, the revolutionary potential of this conjuncture could not be fully developed under the existing ruling class. Thus, the passive revolution of Risorgimento is better understood as a story of two concomitant failures, of both the ruling and the ruled. The former lacked the appeal to become truly hegemonic, while the latter failed to develop into a national-popular bloc that would 'present intransigently all its potentialities for development'. The articulation of these failures in turn produced a process of epochal economic change without radical political change.

This attention to different forms of agency, and their respective limitations, clearly points towards the contingency of passive revolution. This point is stated by Gramsci again in relation to the two elements of Marx's *Preface* mentioned above, which 'must first be developed critically in all their implications, and purged of every residue of mechanicism and fatalism' (Gramsci, 1971a: 107, Q15§17). Thus, while the transition effected by Risorgimento was economic and political at once, it is in the latter field that thesis and antithesis face each other, with an outcome that cannot be predicted in advance. This is because the relation of political forces, while being affected by transformations in the mode of production, cannot but be dependent on 'an evaluation of the degree of homogeneity, self-awareness and organisation attained by the various social classes' (Gramsci, 1971a: 181, Q15§17). In this respect, 'any passive revolution is the historical expression of determined correlations of force and, at the same time, a modifying factor of the same' (Modonesi, 2014: 158).. Indeed, it is through the study of the specific relation of political forces that one can grasp how the passive revolution of Risorgimento was successful insofar as it also produced some measure of political transformation. While mostly occurring through 'molecular changes', this process would still 'progressively modify the pre-existing composition of forces' (Gramsci, 1971a: 109, Q15§11). *Trasformismo* is identified as one of the key micro-mechanisms through which firstly 'political figures formed by the democratic opposition parties are incorporated individually into the conservative-moderate "political class"', and

then 'entire groups of leftists [...] pass over to the moderate camp' (Gramsci, 1971a: 58f, Q8§32).

A strong international dimension is already present in these notes. It has two faces, for the international is the source both of pressures towards transition, because of the implied uneven development of capitalism, and of examples for political action. With respect to the former, Gramsci is adamant in suggesting that Italian Risorgimento is inserted in European history as part of 'the Age of the French Revolution and of liberalism' (Gramsci, 1975: 1962, Q19§2), and thus must be understood 'within the framework of European history' (Gramsci, 1975: 1965, Q19§3). Indeed, the French revolution is deemed instrumental in making national unification 'not only possible, but necessary', as it acted 'the most towards deepening a movement that had already begun in "the things", strengthening positive conditions (objective and subjective) of such movement and working as a pole of aggregation and centralisation of human forces scattered around the peninsula and that otherwise would have taken much more to coalesce and understand one another' (Gramsci, 1975: 1968-9, Q19§3). Gramsci is also aware that the French Revolution 'alters the terms for its successors' (Callinicos, 1989: 141), and not exclusively for Italy (Voza, 2004: 191-3). In a note comparing the English and French revolutions to the broadly simultaneous transitions experienced by Germany and Italy, Gramsci argues that 'these variations in the actual process whereby the same historical development manifests itself in different countries have to be related not only to the differing combinations of internal relations within the different nations, but also to the differing international relations' (1971a: 84, Q19§24, 84). Along this line of thought, passive revolution is appropriate 'not only for Italy, but also for other countries that modernised their State through a series of reforms or national wars, but without going through a political revolution of a radical-Jacobin type' (Gramsci, 1975: 504, Q4§57).

International events, and once again the French Revolution paramount among them, also constituted a source of examples to be taken as either threat or inspiration. Ruling classes across Europe were obviously keen to avoid a French scenario and 'to maintain "economic-corporate" power in an international system of passive equilibrium' (Gramsci, 1971a: 132, Q13§1). To achieve this aim, traditional classes resorted to *transformismo* to absorb some of the main advocates of radical demands, and by this weaken the very prospects of radicalisation, as the ruling class can make up for its limitations by using state power to neutralise and decapitate any emerging national-popular bloc. Thus, it is once again in the open-ended balance of political forces – which here also introduces the

importance of access to state power– that is essential for understanding whether a necessary transformation, shaped by the uneven development of capitalism, will manifest itself as a passive revolution. Even in case of a positive answer, Gramsci is adamant that the molecular modifications brought about by passive revolution will still provide ‘a matrix of new changes’ (1971a: 109, Q15§11).

*Fascism.* In a smaller set of notes, Gramsci outlines fascism as another phenomenon to which passive revolution might apply (1971a: 120, Q10I§9). This constitutes the first extension, historical and theoretical at once, of the concept. In terms of its temporal reach, the thesis of passive revolution is now reworked as an interpretation not only of Risorgimento, but ‘of every epoch characterised by complex historical upheavals’ (Gramsci, 1971a: 114, Q15§62). Theoretically, passive revolution is not anymore related to the problematic of twin transition, as the capitalist mode of production has now penetrated into Italy, if highly asymmetrically as explored by Gramsci himself in his writings on the Southern question (1966). This unevenness in the development of productive forces within Italy in turn contributes to a widening gap with more advanced social formations in Europe and increasingly North America. Thus, while with fascism we are certainly not experiencing a transition in modes of production, one could consider it a hybrid transition, entailing an intensification of capitalism in the North and its extension and consolidation in the South of Italy, which had until that point been reduced ‘to the status of a semi-colonial market’ through alliances with the intellectual stratum and the clergy (Gramsci, 1971a: 94, Q19§26). This modernisation on two levels takes place again under a situation of non-hegemonic thesis and weak antithesis, with the limits of the latter exposed in the balance of political forces, as evidenced by Gramsci in a 1926 article for *L’Unità* commenting on the 1919-20 Factory Councils movement (1971b: 343, my translation):

The proletariat was too strong in 1919-20 to be passively submitted any longer to capitalist oppression. But its organising forces were uncertain, hesitant, internally weak, because the socialist Party was simply the amalgamation of at least three parties: what was lacking in Italy in 1919-20 was a well-organised revolutionary party fully committed to the struggle.

As a reaction to this wave of strong yet disorganised rebellion, fascism provides an answer through which ‘relatively far-reaching modifications are being introduced into the country’s economic structure in order to accentuate the “plan of production” element’. As a



consequence, 'socialisation and cooperation in the sphere of production are being increased, without however touching (or at least not going beyond the regulation and control of) individual and group appropriation' (Gramsci, 1971a: 120, Q10I§9). Insofar as this strengthening of the planned dimension enables 'the transition to more advanced political and cultural forms [...] without the kind of radical and destructive cataclysms that are utterly devastating' (Gramsci, 2007: 378, Q8§236), one could thus identify a progressive dimension in fascism, at least in hypothetical form (Voza, 2004: 202).

Also in the case of fascism international factors are a key precondition making structural transformation necessary, while not determining its specific form. On the one hand, fascism as passive revolution 'could be the only solution whereby to develop the productive forces of industry under the direction of the traditional ruling classes, in competition with the more advanced industrial formations of countries which monopolise raw materials and have accumulated massive capital sums' (Gramsci, 1971a: 120, Q10I§9). Thus, the Italian social formation is compelled to change by transformations occurring on a larger scale related to the success of Americanism and Fordism examined in a moment. On the other hand, as in the case of the French Revolution, there is a contagion effect that ruling classes across Europe must ward off. This comparison is explicitly made by Gramsci towards the end of the same note, using a military analogy with war of movement and war of position (Gramsci, 1971a: 120, Q10I§9):

In Europe from 1789 to 1870 there was a (political) war of movement in the French Revolution and a long war of position from 1815 to 1870. In the present epoch, the war of movement took place politically from March 1917 to March 1921; this was followed by a war of position whose representative – both practical (for Italy) and ideological (for Europe) – is fascism.

*Americanism and Fordism.* The third context in which passive revolution is mentioned is much more fleeting and speculative, in the opening note (uncharacteristically without a prior draft) of Notebook 22 on *Americanism and Fordism*. Here, the transition towards Fordism in the productive sphere and the attendant ideology of Americanism in the superstructure are not presented as a passive revolution. Rather, the hypothesis that Gramsci intends to explore is whether Americanism 'can determine a gradual evolution of the same type as the "passive revolution" examined elsewhere, or whether on the other hand it does not simply represent the molecular accumulation of elements destined to produce an "explosion", that is, an upheaval on the French pattern' (Gramsci, 1971a: 278-9,

Q22§1). Gramsci appears to be considering Americanism and Fordism as a potential cause ('can determine'), rather than itself an instance, of passive revolution. This point is better understood in dialogue with another of 'the essentially most important or interesting problems' listed in this first note, where Fordism is presented 'as the ultimate stage in the process of progressive attempts by industry to overcome the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall' (Gramsci, 1971a: 278-9, Q22§1). This points towards both the 'inherent necessity to achieve the organisation of a planned economy' at the heart of Americanism and Fordism, as well as its 'rationality', which implies that 'it should be generalised', rather than 'fought against through trade-union action and through legislation' (Gramsci, 1971a: 312, Q22§13). Gramsci seems thus convinced that Fordism does contain progressive elements, in that 'it is repressive towards its own opponents, but [as] it unleashes, strengthens and intensifies latent forces, it is expansive, and its expansiveness is its distinctive trait' (Gramsci, 1975: 2232, Q23§36). Thus, while Fordism is progressive inasmuch as it contributes to the further development of productive forces, Gramsci follows Marx in defining progress in a different way from the linear conception espoused in bourgeois ideology (Baratta, 2004: 33). This becomes apparent when the progressive dimension of Fordism is cast side by side with considerations on the 'incredible acts of brutality' constitutive of this transition (Gramsci, 1971a: 298, Q22§10), as well as on the high turnover among Ford workers despite higher-than-average wages, explained with reference to much higher levels of physical and mental exertion, and thus indirectly to increased exploitation (Gramsci, 1971a: 311, Q22§13).

Within the context of Americanism and Fordism, Gramsci's reference to passive revolution appears to be further extending the reach of the concept. Now, we are clearly not referring anymore to a transition between modes of production, but rather from one accumulation regime to another, to put it in regulationist terms (Aglietta, 1976). Through its 'scientific organisation of work', high wages and socio-cultural constraints on workers' lives, Fordism generates both an intension (i.e.: intensification and acceleration) and an extension (i.e.: internationalisation) of capitalism. Indeed, the international dimension of compulsion forcing European countries towards an imitation of Fordist methods takes centre-stage, as 'America, through the implacable weight of its economic production (and therefore indirectly), will compel or is already compelling Europe to overturn its excessively antiquated economic and social basis' (Gramsci, 1971a: 317, Q22§15). It is in this context that the hypothesis of passive revolution becomes a potential line of development. Thus, one should look to the balance of political forces of each country within which Fordism is articulated to analyse whether a non-hegemonic yet dominant thesis is faced with a weak

antithesis. While this outcome is not to be discounted, Gramsci suggests that it is only the working class, as the main of those 'groups whose destiny is linked to the further development of the new method', to be in a position to realise the full potential of Fordism, using its transformations in order 'to turn into "freedom" what today is "necessity"', and thus 'bring about the overthrow of the existing forms of civilisation and the forced birth of a new' (Gramsci, 1971a: 317, Q22§15).

### **Passive revolution in Gramsci's *Konstellation*: towards a conceptual core**

Despite these significant conceptual extensions, it is possible to distil four constants to which Gramsci's uses of passive revolution in the three contexts just outlined are implicitly anchored. Two of these constants have to do with the preconditions of a passive revolution, one with the method through which a passive revolution is carried out, and the final one with its outcome. It is argued here that these four elements provide the conceptual core of passive revolution in the *Prison Notebooks*, and that reference to this conceptual core helps understand how passive revolution relates to other key Gramscian concepts, and particularly to hegemony.

Firstly, passive revolution does not occur in a vacuum but within specific international coordinates. These are relevant in two key respects. On the one hand, in structural terms, transformations on the global scale demand from specific state formations an attempt to developmental catch-up through transition, both from a non-capitalist to a capitalist mode of production, as in the case of Italian Risorgimento, and between different regimes of capital accumulation, as with both the intensification of the planned component under fascism and the internationalisation of Fordism. On the other hand, references to the importance of the politico-military equilibrium and to the dissemination of specific ideologies across different social formations suggest that the conditioning role of the international also encompasses superstructures (Gramsci, 1971a: 175-76, Q13§2, 181-82, Q13§17). While international factors make restructuring necessary, they do not imply that such restructuring must take the form of a passive revolution. The international is thus best conceived as a necessary but not sufficient condition for passive revolution. This necessary causal role of the international has been outlined by recent literature linking the implicit in Gramsci and the explicit in Trotsky (Allinson and Anievas, 2010; Morton, 2013). As much as the latter, Gramsci thought that 'capitalism is a world historical phenomenon and its uneven development means that individual nations cannot be at the same level of development at the same time' (1977: 69). Thus, capitalism is conceived as inherently totalising and

impacting differentially upon different social formations, 'creating new, unique and historically concrete combinations' (Gramsci, 1971a: 182, Q13§17). Both in the form of the Trotskyian 'whip of external necessity' and through the diffusion of ideologies and practices, successful or otherwise, at certain points in time the international compels a transformation in national social formations.

Secondly, if the content of such an externally-induced transformation is to take a passive revolutionary form, this is dependent on another precondition, located on the national scale. Informed by Hegel's theory of history, Gramsci sees passive revolution as generated by a thesis that, despite its limitations, 'develops to the full its potential for struggle' (1971a: 110, Q15§11), with the antithesis failing to do so. The presence of this condition is always verified in the relation of political forces. This is particularly evident in Gramsci's analysis of the failure of subaltern classes, both during Risorgimento and in the Factory Councils movement, to develop a political project that is radical and viable at once. But it could have gone otherwise, as evidenced in the critique of the Action Party and the Socialist Party respectively, which highlights the agency possessed by subaltern classes, albeit within particularly narrow constraints.

Thirdly, and still on the specificities of political society, passive revolution is characterised in its method by the heavy reliance on state power on the part of the dominant class. As mentioned, the full development of the thesis, and its eventual success, does not depend on the hegemonic strength of the ruling class, 'able to present itself as an "integral State", with all the intellectual and moral forces necessary and sufficient for organising a complete and perfect society' (Gramsci, 1971a: 271, Q6§10), as it had happened to the bourgeoisie during the French Revolution. Rather, the necessary structural transformation is only achieved through the ruling class' reliance on state power as a substitute for its limited or lacking hegemony. Along these lines, *trasformismo* can be understood as one among several state instruments used to weaken and defuse the political potential of subaltern classes.

Lastly, in terms of its outcome, passive revolution entails some measure of progress in two key respects. The distance between Gramsci's understanding of progress outlined earlier and the teleological bourgeois interpretation could not be clearer than in the repeated pairing of passive revolution with Quinet's 'revolution-restoration', which demonstrates sensitivity to the non-linear and intimately contradictory nature of capitalist development. On the one hand, passive revolution implies that the transition, either towards or within capitalism, is successfully completed. Thus, despite the persistence of old features, 'under a

certain political integument social relations are transformed' (Burgio, 2014: 255, my translation). This brings forth greater exploitation but with it also greater contradictions and thus greater possibilities for struggle, as 'for Gramsci, the development of capital is equal to the development of the proletariat, and thus of the possibilities of the revolution' (Baratta, 2004: 33, my translation). On the other hand, 'revolution-restoration' also refers to the partial fulfilment and displacement of the demands raised by the embryonic subaltern bloc, as suggested by Callinicos (2010: 498). As Burgio put it, this is 'an essential characteristic of passive revolution', as the partial and distorted incorporation of subaltern demands in the actions of the ruling class still 'demonstrates their concreteness, importance and effectiveness' (2014: 391, my translation).

These strong elements of continuity might not be enough in the eyes of some scholars to dispel the sense of inconsistency in the semantic extensions that passive revolution experiences throughout the notebooks. This is one of the key charges made by Callinicos (2010), discussed in detail later on, and resembles similar conceptual problems already noted by Anderson with respect to hegemony (1976). Indeed, Gramsci appears to be ambivalent also with respect to the relation between passive revolution and hegemony. In some instances, passive revolution is presented as a residual strategy deployed to maintain power when hegemony is lacking ('dictatorship without hegemony'). In other circumstances, passive revolution seems to occur under conditions of limited, fractured, hegemony, when a class or fraction thereof is hegemonic towards some others but not across society. This helps explain why some concessions towards oppositional movements are necessary for the system to survive, insofar as legitimacy is contingent on the provision of such concessions.

To account for the uneasy relation between hegemony and passive revolution, Morton suggests that the two concepts should be 'telescoped' (2013: 255). This implies that passive revolution and hegemony are better placed on two different conceptual plans and thus need not to be seen in opposition. Much more than passive revolution, hegemony has a structural dimension, as it is grounded in 'the decisive function exercised by the leading group in the decisive nucleus of economic activity' (Gramsci, 1971a: 161, Q13§18), to the point that in the case of Fordism hegemony 'is born in the factory' (Gramsci, 1971a: 285, Q22§2). Hegemony is thus an organic concept, rooted in production relations but also encompassing political and civil society, thus allowing the dominant class to be seen as also leading other classes and creating the conditions for the 'interrelated and reciprocal development of structure and superstructure' (Morton, 2007a: 96). As extensively discussed above, passive revolution instead occurs when the dominant class fails to lead, while subordinated classes are on their

own part unable to mount a credible hegemonic challenge. Thus, passive revolution is crucially dependent on a specific relation of political forces within a situation of 'organic crisis', and is thus a strategy available to the dominant class and predominantly situated in political society (Gramsci, 1971a: 107, Q15§17).. As Gramsci puts it, within 'the three fundamental moments into which a "situation" or an equilibrium of forces can be distinguished', the emphasis should be 'on the second moment (equilibrium of political forces), and especially on the third moment (politico-military equilibrium)' (1971a: 107, Q15§17). Given this emphasis on political society, one can also see why passive revolution is much more dependent than hegemony on the exercise of state power. Thus, passive revolution is placed on the same conceptual level as Caesarism, to which it is often and not necessarily accurately assimilated, as a '*vox media* tasked with reflecting the complexity of concrete historical processes' (Burgio, 2014: 275, my translation). In all these cases political intervention is necessitated in the light of an organic crisis that is unable to find a hegemonic solution. On a yet more concrete-complex level (Jessop, 1982), one can then locate the tactics and practices that are deployed to carry out a passive revolution. While Gramsci placed strong emphasis on *trasformismo*, this is not the only way in which an emerging national-popular bloc can be weakened and fragmented. Practices of divide-and-rule, as well as forms of populist disintermediation, might well serve the same function.

As other concepts in Gramsci's thought, passive revolution appears characterised by a degree of definitional instability, as it denotes the twin transition towards capitalism and a modern state, the hybrid transition of fascism as well as the transition within capitalism spurred by Fordism. While part of this conceptual instability might be contingent on Gramsci's imprisonment, which meant hard living conditions and an interest in concealing the content of his writings,<sup>3</sup> it is undeniable that this instability has to do with the dialectical method underpinning Gramsci's thought. If philosophy is to be praxis, then transformations in the material world will also demand modifications in the concepts used to apprehend reality. At the same time, while empirical applications might change depending on context, both local and global, for a concept to be of any help it is essential to retain a core. This is particularly true from the perspective of Gramsci's 'absolute historicism' (1971a: 465, Q11§27), which implies the ambition of finding in the past the kernel of present processes, while being at the same time able to weed out elements that have lost their relevance. The conceptual core of passive revolution has been identified in this section in four key elements. Firstly, the international as a source of both material pressures towards transition, in light of the uneven development of capitalism, and of events and ideas that become inevitable

reference points of an epoch. Secondly, a structurally necessary transformation whose specific form and content are determined by a specific relation of political forces, and particularly by the presence of a non-hegemonic dominant class and a weak, or weakly organised and articulated, subaltern bloc. Thirdly, the extensive use of state power as a surrogate for hegemony on the part of the ruling class to effect a transformation for which it cannot win the consent of the ruled. Finally, an outcome whereby popular demands are simultaneously partly fulfilled and displaced in a way that essentially consolidates the political *status quo*.

### **In dialogue with Morton: limiting the continuum of passive revolution**

Perhaps out of a need to find a point of engagement with existing traditions in the field, the first generation of neo-Gramscian scholarship in IPE put a much stronger emphasis on hegemony than passive revolution. However, the latter concept is not altogether absent from the writings of Robert Cox, the intellectual father of this tradition. Cox's understanding of passive revolution is emblematic of his broader approach to IR and IPE, criticised for its Eurocentric and diffusionist tendencies (Hobson, 2007; Worth, 2008). Passive revolution is on the one hand largely assimilated to processes of capitalist restructuring triggered by 'external dependency' (Cox, 1987: 238), and on the other hand is effectively equated with revolutions from above, to the point that 'Caesarism becomes the instrumentality of a "passive revolution"' (Cox, 1987: 192).

Morton's stronger emphasis on passive revolution (2007a, 2007b, 2010b, 2013) is crucial in his attempt to push neo-Gramscian IPE beyond the weaknesses of the Coxian template. In dialogue with political Marxism, critical geography and Marxist state theory, Morton has stressed the role of the state as the heart of the nodal scale in which transnational and global pressures are articulated, thus shaping the specific form and content of each process of capitalist restructuring. Drawing on Gramsci's own writings on linguistics and translation, Morton has also argued for the constant reworking of Gramsci's concepts in line with his method of borrowing concepts from other authors, and enrich them with new determinations as they are brought to bear upon different empirical situations (2010b: 334; see also Boothman, 2006/7).

In this approach, passive revolution constitutes the local face of the unfolding and intensification of capitalism on a global scale. More specifically, following Trotsky's remark that sees unevenness as 'the most general law of the historic process' (1985: 4), passive revolution allows Morton to link in a systematic way the patterns of uneven and combined

development typical of capitalism with the specific forms in which capitalist relations of production are established, entrenched and reproduced within different social formations (2013: 4, 99-102). In Morton's own words, 'the notion of passive revolution is able to encapsulate *specific* processes within the *general* circumstances of uneven and combined development' (2007b: 612). Placed within the debate on the relation between the international and the social (Rosenberg, 2006; Callinicos and Rosenberg, 2008), one could suggest that passive revolution allows the international, in the form of the structural conditioning of uneven and combined development, to become social again, as it is articulated on a local scale with processes of class and state formation, while still allowing significant room for agency.

Informed by this approach, critical IPE has experienced a revival of publications referring explicitly to passive revolution. With reference to Scotland, Neil Davidson (2010) has identified a passive revolution occurring even before Gramsci's starting point of the Jacobin 'revolutionary explosion'. Moving closer in time to, but further in space from, Italian Risorgimento, Allinson and Anievas present the Meiji restoration as a 'passive revolution under the world-historical conditions of uneven and combined development' (2010: 470), with successful state-led industrialisation identified as its main progressive element. Ian McKay (2010) takes instead successive waves of modernisation in Canada as part of a long passive revolution running from the 1840s to the 1940s. Closer to our own times, transitions from state to neoliberal capitalism in Poland, China and Russia have also been analysed through reference to passive revolution (Shields, 2006; Gray, 2010; Simon, 2010). Latin America has been an especially fertile ground for examining the reach of passive revolution (Modonesi, 2014), with analyses ranging from Brazil (Del Roio, 2012), to Mexico (Morton, 2007a and 2010a; Hesketh, 2010), to Bolivia (Hesketh and Morton, 2014). Nash (2013) and Wanner (2014) have instead provided sectorial understandings of passive revolution, related respectively to water governance in South Africa and the 'green economy' in international organisations.

This proliferation of studies referring to passive revolution, occasionally also finding it ill-suited for grasping specific processes (Bruff, 2010), appears broadly consistent with Gramsci's understanding of passive revolution as 'a criterion of interpretation' (1971a: 114, Q15§62). Going further along the same path, Morton suggests that passive revolution is best understood as 'a portmanteau concept that reveals the continuities and changes within the order of capital' (2007a: 68). The analogy with modernity, itself seen as a portmanteau concept (Anderson, 1984: 113), is only sketched out by Morton (2010b: 335), but is drawn



explicitly by Peter Thomas, who suggests that passive revolution 'has almost become synonymous with modernity', thus defining a process 'in which the mass of humanity is reduced to mere spectators of a history that progresses without its involvement' (2006: 73).

As suggested by Callinicos, however, there is always a risk that in its application to ever more different situations the concept loses its specificity, eventually becoming 'a distinction without a difference' (2010: 505). While this charge might be excessive, there are two significant interpretive tensions in Morton's work. The first relates to the role afforded to subaltern forces in defining passive revolution. In *Revolution and the State in Modern Mexico*, Morton provides a twin definition of passive revolution, understood as 'a revolution without mass participation, or a "revolution from above"' (2013: 38), and as a process in which 'a revolutionary form of political transformation is pressed into a conservative project of restoration' (2013: 39). Morton is less clear when it comes to defining the relation between these two definitions. On the one hand, this 'may involve a dialectical relation between processes of passive revolution from above [...] and processes of passive revolution from below' (Morton, 2013: 254), very much along the lines of the dialectic between non-hegemonic ruling class and weak or weakly organised subaltern bloc outlined earlier. On the other hand, Morton appears in other junctures to suggest that the two definitions are better seen 'in a linked, but alternate' sense (2013: 38-9), thus implying that a passive revolution might obtain also when only one of the two dimensions is present (see also Morton, 2013: 258). This opens up to the possibility of a passive revolution without 'a vigorous antithesis which can present intransigently all its potentialities for development' (Gramsci, 1971a: 114, Q15§62), thus potentially in contrast with Gramsci's own understanding. For, if it is demanded by the 'whip of external necessity' imposed by uneven and combined development, 'passive revolution is in any case a movement of "reaction" from above, which implies - subordinates and subsumes - the existence of a previous "action", without this necessarily leading to the dichotomous simplification of revolution-counterrevolution' (Modonesi, 2014: 159).

This ambiguity, and the potential neglect of the subaltern that it harbours, has another significant implication on the conceptual level, where the partial fulfilment of subaltern demands tends to be obfuscated by their displacement. Here, the point is more one of emphasis, as in his study of the neoliberal turn in Mexico Morton is extremely sensitive to the partial accommodation of popular concerns taking the ideological form of 'social liberalism' and translating into neo-corporatist policies through PRONASOL (*Programa Nacional de Solidaridad*) (Morton, 2013: 123). However, this empirical attention to the partial

appeasement of subaltern classes does not always translate into similar conceptual attention when passive revolution is defined. Much greater weight is instead given on the one hand to ‘the ruptural conditions of modern state development’ and on the other hand to the “‘restoration” of social relations’ and to ‘class strategies linked to the continual furtherance of capitalism as a response to its crisis conditions of accumulation’ (Morton, 2013: 4, 23). It is instead essential to throw this element into greater relief, as the partial satisfaction of demands is arguably the most insidious element of passive revolution, in that it is exactly the tool by which ‘passivity’ in the masses is produced. Indeed, in his discussion of Zapatistas, Morton appears to be turning this mechanism on its head, as in this case, ‘far from prompting capitalist restructuring, the “vigorous antithesis”, the moment that seeks radical rupture, was a reaction to it’ (Callinicos, 2010: 501). Thus, passive revolution in this instance does not seem to achieve its outcome – that is, rendering the popular opposition passive – but rather produces a strengthening of movements and spaces of resistance. If the presence of a vigorous antithesis prior to a passive revolution and the partial fulfilment of popular demands are not sufficiently emphasised, then passive revolution risks being conflated with any way of adapting capital accumulation locally to global imperatives while preserving the prominence of the ruling class. Would this not be covered largely by the concept of capitalist restructuring?

The second interpretive tension instead pertains to the relation between passive revolutions leading into capitalist modernity and passive revolutions within capitalist social relations. To understand the long-standing effect of the former, which eventually makes the latter more likely within a given social formation, Morton suggests that passive revolution ought to be understood not only as ‘a set of class strategies’, but also as ‘a condition’ (2013: 4). By this, he means that the passive revolution into modernity, with the ‘partial or minimal hegemony’ that it entrenches, ‘may have various “path-dependent” (determined but not deterministic) effects that shape and define the nature and purpose of state actions during particular phases of development’ (Morton, 2013: 112). Gramsci’s view appears somewhat different, as he saw a fundamental distinction between passive revolutions of XIX century Europe, which – albeit in a distorted form – ‘still mediated historical transitions’ (Burgio, 2014: 137, my translation), and the passive revolutions of fascism and Fordism, which instead consolidated and reorganised social relations within capitalism. In relation to Gramsci’s implicit references to periodisation (Gramsci, 1971a: 223, Q14§23; Thomas, 2009: 152-3), insofar as it ushered in capitalist modernity, Italian Risorgimento succeeded in establishing a new historical epoch (*fare epoca*). On the other hand, the XX century passive

revolutions adumbrated by Gramsci at best succeeded in prolonging the same epoch (*durare*). If this is the case, one can then infer that passive revolutions within capitalism, because of their inability of leading beyond it, are necessarily more contingent and provisional, and are better understood as '*truces* within a structural conflict that cannot be solved without the full and total defeat [...] of one of the two opponents' (Burgio, 2014: 263-4, my translation). This view contrasts with the 'relatively "permanent" character' ascribed to passive revolution by Morton with reference to postcolonial capitalism and state formation (2013: 243).

Thus, passive revolution could be taken in an alternative direction to the one proposed by Morton in two respects. On the one hand, if one accepts the different 'structural' nature of passive revolutions within capitalism compared to passive revolutions towards capitalism, then the contingency of passive revolution would be preferred to Morton's focus on 'the continuum of passive revolution' (2013: 23, 242). This shift would entail greater attention to the specific relation of political forces within a social formation and to the compromises offered by a non-hegemonic ruling class to an emerging subaltern bloc. On the other hand, a stronger conceptual emphasis on the role of the subaltern, of its limitations, as well as of the rewards it is offered via passive revolution, unveils the non-coercive mechanisms through which the passivity of subaltern classes is achieved, and through it the stabilisation of bourgeois class rule under restructured capitalist social relations. Neither of these positions is necessarily incompatible with Morton's account, and indeed they are at times implicit in his analysis of Mexican modern history, but the contention here is that they must be clearly spelled out conceptually if one is to recover fully the potential of passive revolution in the contemporary organic crisis experienced by both advanced and peripheral social formations.

### **Limited yet contemporary: passive revolution beyond Callinicos' critique**

Some of the points above on the limitations of the use of passive revolution in neo-Gramscian IPE is not too dissimilar from the critique advanced by Callinicos (2010). In light of the conceptual core identified earlier, agreement with Callinicos is however more contingent than it might initially look. Indeed, this section suggests that Callinicos' critique of passive revolution is not entirely convincing in three respects. Firstly, his concerns about the problems in extending the domain of passive revolution from the establishment to the intensification of capitalism are somewhat misplaced, as this extension is in fact consistent

with Gramsci's understanding of the inescapably contradictory nature of capitalism. Secondly, Callinicos appears to misread Gramsci's ambivalence towards reformism, eventually downplaying the progressive dimension of passive revolution as partial fulfilment of popular demands which is so crucial to his own definition. Thirdly, in his attempt to highlight the risks of stretching further the reach of passive revolution, Callinicos does not place sufficient emphasis on the structurally more significant role that the international has garnered over time exactly as a consequence of the expansion and intensification of uneven capitalist development. This discussion opens the way for assessing the contemporary relevance of passive revolution.

To begin with, Callinicos suggests that Gramsci's analogy between Risorgimento, fascism and Fordism misses an important difference between these processes. While all of these transitions arise 'from the "inherent necessity" of socio-political transformation' (Callinicos, 2010: 498), Callinicos points out an irreducible difference between Risorgimento on the one hand and fascism and Fordism on the other hand. The former can be plausibly described as a passive revolution because, '[i]n however distorted a shape, the *ancien régime* has given way to a society in which the capitalist mode of production prevails' (Callinicos, 2010: 498). However, neither fascism nor Fordism entail 'any kind of systemic transformation', and are thus better seen as '*counter-revolutionary* projects that seek to manage the structural contradictions of the capitalist mode of production, not the accomplishment of socialist transformation by other means' (Callinicos, 2010: 498).

If this becomes a discriminant for defining passive revolutions, then Callinicos appears to be adding a new attribute to his original definition, which sees passive revolutions as 'socio-political processes in which revolution-inducing strains are at once displaced and at least partly fulfilled' (Callinicos, 2010: 498). Now, passive revolutions are also expected to result in a systemic transformation, that is: in a transition that achieves 'socialist transformation by other means', if starting from the capitalist mode of production. Here Callinicos is not only suggesting that an organic crisis is a precondition for a passive revolution, but also that the latter must provide a 'systemic' solution to the former. Following this move, passive revolution is effectively reduced to transitions between modes of production, and becomes applicable only to the first Gramscian usage.

This understanding neglects that, by moving beyond the problematic of a twin transition for defining passive revolutions, Gramsci appears more sensitive to the possibility of progressive outcomes that simultaneously fall short of transition between modes of production and succeed in defusing revolutionary demands. This is particularly visible

when reading a fragment in which the outcome of 'active' and passive revolutions is compared with an eye to its international preconditions (Gramsci, 1971a: 116, Q10II§61, emphasis added):

But the complex problem arises of the relation of internal forces in the country in question, of the relation of international forces, of the country's geo-political position. In reality, the drive towards *revolutionary renewal* may be initiated by the pressing needs of a given country, in given circumstances, and you get the revolutionary explosion in France, victorious internationally as well. But the drive for *renewal* may be caused by the combination of progressive forces which in themselves are scanty and inadequate (though with immense potential, since they represent their country's future), with an international situation favourable to their expansion and victory.

Thus, beyond variations in the 'given circumstances', passive revolutions will bring about forms of 'renewal' that are short of 'revolutionary', rather than necessarily a 'systemic transformation' (Callinicos, 2010: 498). Gramsci's understanding of the potentially progressive role of corporativism in the case of fascism strengthens this point. In an admittedly messy note, Gramsci hints at how corporativism could be a key element in the passive revolution of fascism, as (2007: 378, Q8§236):

the emergence of an 'intermediate economy' – i.e.: an economy in the space between the purely individualistic one and the one that is comprehensively planned –enables the transition to more advanced political and cultural forms to take place without the kind of radical and destructive cataclysms that are utterly devastating.

While clearly falling short of revolution, corporativism provides an 'intermediate' point that gives masses a sense of a greater stake in the body politic as well as in economic life, if in a highly regimented and distorted form. Indeed, one could see here the success of the ruling class in using state power towards a form of 'fulfilment by displacement' of some of the popular demands articulated during the Factory Councils movement. Similarly, if and when instantiated as a passive revolution, Fordism further displaces class-based demands, and indeed greatly intensifies the exploitation of the labour force, but it provides a partial answer in the sphere of distribution, enhancing workers' ability to consume.

Secondly, and related to the previous point, Callinicos appears to misread Gramsci's ambivalence towards reformism. Callinicos first suggests that Gramsci displays a 'tendency

to assimilate the structure of bourgeois and socialist revolutions' (2010: 498), which are instead constitutively different as the economic dominance of the bourgeoisie can develop already within a feudal society, while the working class 'can become economically dominant only through taking collective control of the means of production, which requires the armed seizure of political power' (Harman, 1977). In light of this consideration, Gramsci's position towards reformism is interpreted as suggesting the possibility of a socialist transition that 'obviates the necessity of the forcible overthrow of the existing order' (Callinicos, 2010: 499). This might well be the interpretation of Gramsci's thought favoured by those aiming to justify Eurocommunism, as well as scholars who see hegemony as emerging on 'the general field of discursivity' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 134). However, this view provides a very partial representation of Gramsci's ambivalence towards reformism. As just discussed, Gramsci appears more interested in acknowledging that also within capitalism there are transitions that present a progressive dimension for the working classes, increasing their potential for self-awareness and emancipation. Sassoon has emphasised this element, when suggesting that 'if all those poor men and women, particularly in the lesser developed countries, who are affected by trends towards globalisation are not to be patronised, the present and potential future beneficial effects of global processes must be investigated as much as the negative ones' (2001: 10).

While Gramsci is admittedly ambiguous with respect to the 'armed' dimension of seizing power emphasised by Harman, this need not imply neither that hegemony can succeed by remaining confined to civil society only nor that force is not to be used against class antagonists. Indeed, the opposite appears to be the case. This is best understood in relation to Gramsci's concept of the 'integral state', understood as 'a dialectical unity of the moments of civil society and political society' (Thomas, 2009: 137). In the former, social classes compete for achieving leadership and potentially 'civil hegemony' (Gramsci, 1971a: 243, Q13§7), but this is only ultimately affirmed by seizing political power in the latter. Through its own modernisation, itself a function of the rise of the bourgeoisie, the state has developed a much more capillary presence in civil society, creating the preconditions for 'an increasingly more sophisticated internal articulation and condensation of social relations' (Thomas, 2009: 140). This emergence and consolidation of an 'integral state' is in Gramsci's eyes one of the most striking political achievements of the bourgeoisie, which 'poses itself as an organism in continuous movement, capable of absorbing the entire society, assimilating it to its own cultural and economic level' (Gramsci, 1971a: 260, Q8§2). Similarly, and here Callinicos is correct in suggesting that Gramsci implies an analogy between bourgeois and

proletarian routes to power, the party of the working classes should aim at ‘founding a new type of State’ in the mould of the Jacobin example (Gramsci, 1971a: 147, Q13§7). However, a very sharp line of demarcation is drawn throughout Gramsci’s writings, identifying the groups to be brought closer to the working class through hegemony, and comprising all the subaltern classes, and the ruling class to be further antagonised and eventually confronted through this very process (Robaina, 2006). The construction of a national-popular bloc thus demands a function of leadership on the part of the working class towards other subaltern groups in ‘the concrete formation and operation of a collective will’ (Gramsci, 1971a: 130, Q15§1), to be used against class antagonists. While Gramsci is clear in suggesting that a war of movement is much less suited to seizing state power in modern societies (1971a: 147, Q13§7), achieving the latter would still entail ‘a dictatorial phase characterising the beginnings of every new type of State’ towards the current ruling class (Gramsci, 1975: 1370, Q11§5).

Given Callinicos’ substantial contributions towards a Marxist theory of the international (2004, 2007, 2009), my third point here is better understood as a call for shifting emphasis more than an actual criticism. Perhaps in light of the aim of his critique – that is: reminding Morton and other neo-Gramscians of the risks of further extending the reach of passive revolution – Callinicos only cursorily mentions the role of the international in making restructuring necessary (2010: 498). However, we have already outlined how the international has a key causal role in each of the three uses of passive revolution in the *Prison Notebooks*. Indeed, one could infer an intensification of the role of the international over time. In the period following 1748, with the decline of the French monarchy, a certain ‘international balance of powers’ was considered to be ‘a negative and passive element’ in the emergence of a collective will demanding Italy’s independence and unification (Gramsci, 2007: 59, Q6§78). However, the international ‘became an active element after the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars’ (Gramsci, 1975: 746, Q6§78). In the early XX century, the relevance of international factors is further heightened. This happens on the one hand in the form of ‘competition with the more advanced industrial formations’ that make fascism ‘the only solution’ for developing productive forces without a change in the ruling class (Gramsci, 1971a: 120, Q10I§9). On the other hand, when Gramsci asks whether the economic power garnered by the US thanks to Fordism ‘will compel or is already compelling Europe to overturn its excessively antiquated economic and social basis’ (1971a: Q22§15, 317), he clearly envisages a positive answer (Gramsci, 1971a: 312, Q22§13). Just as importantly, one cannot but notice how over time Gramsci’s emphasis also shifts from the role of states, be

they the French monarchy or the Papal States in the period preceding Risorgimento, towards an attention to expansions and transformations in the mode of production.

If the intensification of this globalising tendency of capitalism is, despite all countertendencies, to be considered as dominant (Pradella, 2014), then one would expect an increase in both the frequency and intensity of restructuring. As this is a necessary but not sufficient condition for passive revolution to occur, it is then a matter of conjuncture, and within it of the domestic balance of political forces, if ever more penetrated by international and transnational elements, to determine whether the specific restructuring takes a passive revolutionary form, or whether instead it is better understood as a counter-reform (Coutinho, 2007), or altogether as a counter-revolution (Duménil and Lévy, 2005). Hence, whether the antithesis still remains ‘uncertain, hesitant, internally weak’ and displays ‘the lack of a unitary popular initiative’ (Gramsci, 1971b: 343; Gramsci, 1975: 1324, Q10II§41), or whether it has developed organisationally to the point of achieving a more radical rupture, is a question of empirical inquiry – as well as political strategy – that can only be answered on a case-by-case basis. Similarly, whether state power is wielded by the dominant class towards the partial fulfilment and displacement of popular demands can only be ascertained by paying sustained attention to the relation of political forces.

What we certainly see today is an intensification of uneven development brought about by neoliberalism (Kiely, 2007), and a concomitant intensification of exploitation, which increases the reach and intensity of restructuring, and with these the instability of both the global economy and its constituent parts. If this precondition is ever more present, then we might not be surprised to see the seeds of approaching passive revolutions when looking at ruling class reactions to the great mass mobilisations of this decade. While developments in Egypt hardly resemble anything of the passive revolutionary sort (Beinin, 2014; De Smet, 2016), the Tunisian case provides a case in point. Here, the organic crisis of the social formation engendered mass protests leading to Ben Ali’s overthrow. Within this conjuncture, the failure of the revolutionary movement to equip itself with a Jacobin party, and the concomitant reorganisation of the dominant class around *Nidaa Tounes* and to a lesser extent *Ennahda* have produced a relation of political forces typical of passive revolution. While failing to be hegemonic, the dominant class has been able to contain and displace radical popular demands by partly fulfilling them in two ways. On the one hand, through representative democratic institutions, which have however been channelled towards ‘moderation’ (Netterstrøm, 2015), becoming a very effective mechanism for co-optation and for stifling the emergence of a radical national-popular bloc. On the other



hand, partial fulfilment also takes the form of restored conditions for accumulation, increasingly hindered by the predatory turn abetted by Ben Ali's neoliberal reforms (Kaboub, 2013), which – while benefitting parts of the local capitalist class – were endangering the sustainability of capitalist relations of production on the national scale.<sup>4</sup> This move towards 'saving capitalism from the capitalists' might indeed constitute the platform for a passive revolution undertaken by the ruling classes to respond to the wave of popular mobilisation occurring also across much of Western Europe and North America, and usually associated with the Occupy movements. In this case, 'the whip of external necessity' in the realm of productive forces is to be found in automation. However, much like Fordism, this transformation is still 'fettered' by capitalist relations of production. Yet, under capitalist guidance, automation might be one of the ingredients of a new truce provisionally stabilising capitalism while providing the partial fulfilment and simultaneous displacement of popular demands. Other ingredients of this passive revolutionary threat might take the form of greater possibilities for consumption through ultra-loose monetary policy but also through the increasingly popular 'helicopter money' option, as well as in the form of a universal basic income.<sup>5</sup> This would only provide a temporary fix to the contradictions of capitalism, but it is exactly stumbling between one fix and another that capitalist social formations have renewed themselves, usually weakening the prospects for radical political alternatives. It is in this light that the usefulness of passive revolution, as both an analytical tool and a political programme to organise and fight against, becomes apparent.

## **Conclusion**

Starting from an analysis of the different uses of passive revolution in the *Prison Notebooks*, this article has argued for the continued relevance of the concept, albeit intended in a less comprehensive way than suggested by Morton's portmanteau analogy. Rather, if defined more narrowly, passive revolution becomes analytically more helpful, as it retains its specificity as one of the forms in which capitalist restructuring can occur in any given social formation. Four elements have been presented as an implicit anchoring to Gramsci's evolving understanding of passive revolution. Two of them are better understood as the preconditions of passive revolution: one international, deriving from the uneven development of capitalism and implying the necessity of restructuring on the national scale; one domestic, identifying a specific relation of political forces, with a dominant, but not hegemonic, ruling class and weak, or weakly organised, subaltern classes. The third element lies in state power as the method through which a passive revolution is carried out by the

ruling class. The final defining feature of passive revolutions is their outcome, with some of the popular demands partly fulfilled but directed towards the consolidation of the political *status quo*, eventually weakening the subaltern bloc.

Thus recast, passive revolution provides the conditions for a differentiated understanding of the multiform trajectories of capitalist restructuring in the contemporary world. On the one hand, insofar as it defines only one of the ways through which the ruling class undertakes restructuring while shoring up its political dominance, a narrower definition of passive revolution implies, and indeed demands, a plurality of strategies on the part of subaltern classes when confronting each and every restructuring. On the other hand, as it pushes us to look more closely at the articulations of global imperatives on the national scale, and more specifically at the balance of political forces, this redefinition of passive revolution is also a powerful antidote against both globalist and economistic tendencies visible in some critical IPE literature.

As its conditions of possibility emerge from the organic crisis of a social formation, passive revolution is a backup strategy for a ruling class that fails to be hegemonic and thus relies on its control of state power and a favourable balance of political forces to perpetuate its own political dominance under new structural conditions. In the midst of a nearly decade-long capitalist crisis, one might be forgiven for thinking that we are experiencing one of those periods of ‘complex historical upheavals’ that Gramsci deemed so propitious for passive revolution, both politically and analytically. And indeed, the return of passive revolution has two major implications that are placed on these two levels. Politically, when a subaltern bloc manages to emerge and articulate its demands, knowing that passive revolution is always a possibility is necessary for such bloc to be aware of the threats surrounding it and thus to fully develop its own potential. Analytically, while conflating passive revolution with modernity appears unwise, recent events in both advanced and peripheral social formations appear to suggest that passive revolution remains a valuable instrument for investigating the twists and turns of capitalist modernity.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Callinicos (2014: 23).

<sup>2</sup> I refer to the 1975 complete Italian edition only when an English translation of the *Prison Notebooks* was not available or accessible. On these occasions, translations are mine. In addition to referencing the different editions, the notebook number (Q) as well as the note number (§) is inserted in all citations.

<sup>3</sup> According to Haug (2000), this applies particularly to ‘philosophy of praxis’, which has been hypothesised to be simply a synonym for Marxism in the early stages of Gramsci’s imprisonment, before taking on the peculiarities which would come to identify Gramsci’s own version of historical materialism. For a radically different view on this issue of a ‘code language’ in the *Prison Notebooks*, see Thomas (2009: 102-8).

<sup>4</sup> For a more general articulation of this point on the perverse effects of neoliberalism for capitalism as a whole, see Davidson (2015).

<sup>5</sup> For a radical left argument for universal basic income, see Srnicek and Williams (2015).

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